

ANALYSIS OF THE ERRORS OF SENIOR SECONDARY STUDENTS IN IGBO LANGUAGE WRITTEN COMPOSITION

OMEJE, MONICA OBIAGELI & CHINEKE, STELLA OBIOMA

Department of Arts Education, University of Nigeria, West Africa

ABSTRACT

This study was designed to identify, classify and analyze errors in students' Igbo written composition with a view to finding the students' areas of strengths and weaknesses. Thus, a descriptive survey design was used for the study. The study was carried out in six selected secondary schools in Nsukka Education zone. 600 SS II students formed the research subjects. Data for the work was generated using students' scores from a written composition, and the data collected were organized and analyzed using percentage and frequency tables. It was discovered that students commit many errors, and out of the identified errors, errors of expression and errors of mechanics were the commonest type found in students' scripts. Also, non usage of sound Igbo figurative expression and the use of dialects have the highest percentages and frequencies in errors of expression, while wrong use of punctuation marks posed the highest difficulty in errors of mechanics. Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended among others that Igbo language teachers should always read external examinations' Chief Examiners' reports to enable them know areas students are constantly having problems in essay writing to enable the teachers address those problem areas in the course of their teachings.

KEYWORDS: Error, Error Analysis, Language, Written Composition

INTRODUCTION

Igbo language is one of the major languages spoken in the Eastern part of Nigeria. It is also one of the three major indigenous languages recognized by the Nigerian government to be studied in schools, (FRN, 2004). The other two are Hausa and Yoruba. Since its inception as a school subject, the teaching and learning of Igbo language has been facing a lot of challenges. One of such challenges is the poor achievement of students in the subject at certificate examinations. Whenever students achieve poorly in Igbo language study, the emphasis is always in the area of written composition, (Omeje, 2009). This is because the mastery of any language implies correct usage at the grammatical, morphological and semantic levels. Composition is an important aspect of Igbo language study, which exposes students to the above mentioned aspects of language skills (grammar, morphology and semantic rules), as applicable to the language. In support of this fact, Ogbalu (1972: 6) stated that "composition is very important for testing a student's command of the language, students should be able to write compositions with ease and the usual rules for writing compositions should be observed".

The main objective of teaching composition writing in Igbo language studies is to help students gain good control of writing Igbo language according to the acceptable basis, forms and patterns of the language. It also involves helping students to acquire and develop the habits of thinking and writing clearly and objectively on any topic using appropriate style and register. The register for writing in Igbo language is the standard Igbo. Standard language according to Cambridge Dictionaries Online is a variety of language that is used by governments, in the media, in schools and for international communication. In this line of thought, Emenanjo (1988) viewed standard Igbo as the Igbo that is generally

accepted and understood by all Igbo speaking people, irrespective of dialectal differences. It is a collection of different Igbo dialects hence, no persons, or group can lay claim to it as the original speakers of the version of the language. Since Igbo as a language is made up of so many dialects, the standard Igbo is the version that is being learned and taught in schools. It is the version students are expected to use in writing their compositions in examinations. However, evidence from the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) Chief Examiner's reports, (2009; 2011; 2012) reveals that many students have no mastery of the standard Igbo. As such, they commit a lot of errors in their written examinations.

An error is a deviation from accuracy or correctness. According to Brown (2000), an "error" is a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a language learner, reflecting his/her inter-language competence. Language error is therefore user's deviations from standard language norms in grammar, syntax, pronunciation and punctuation. Error-making as emphasized by Robinson (1998) is a natural phenomenon in learning of all kinds. Thus, learner's errors have been considered as indispensable for their learning a language, (Tizon, 2014). Nevertheless, when students commit errors in Igbo language, especially in composition writing, it is frowned at and it contributes to students' poor achievement in the language.

Written composition is an aspect of Igbo language teaching and learning which exposes students to the rules in writing skill that is, mechanical accuracy, organization, expression, coherency and spelling. Researchers (Umo, 2001; Umo and Chineke, 2014) have shown that students perform poorly in Igbo essay writing because they lack the writing skills. This is why the WAEC chief examiner's reports of (2009; 2011; 2012) identified students' major weaknesses in Igbo language as thus: inability to express themselves very well in the standard Igbo, poor knowledge of grammatical rules, inability to put diacritic marks where necessary, inability to understand questions and use of dialects in writing by many of the students. These shortcomings pose a great problem to the study of Igbo language in general and composition writing in particular hence, the need to identify and analyze the types of errors committed by students in their composition writing.

Error Analysis is the examination of those errors committed by students in both the spoken and written medium. Bain (2006) defined error analysis in language teaching and learning, as a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a language. The study of error is part of the investigation of the process of language learning. In this respect, it provides researchers with a picture of the linguistic development of the learners as well as indications as to the learning process. Error analysis has become an interesting task for the teachers teaching writing as it helps them identify their own teaching methodologies and their students' ability in writing. The present researchers therefore feel that one way of tackling the problem of poor achievement in Igbo language is by identifying and analyzing students' errors in Igbo written composition and proffer possible solutions with a view to improving students' achievement in the language. To carry out the study, two research questions were posed. They are:

- What are the commonest errors committed by secondary school students in Igbo written composition?
- At what frequencies do students commit errors in Igbo language essay writing?

METHODS

This study adopted a descriptive survey design. Descriptive survey according to Ali (2006) is the type of design that describes events as they are without any manipulation. This design was chosen because the researchers intend to describe and present the data as they are. The study was carried out in Nsukka Urban of Nsukka Education Zone of Enugu State. The entire Senior Secondary Students Two (SSII) in Nsukka Urban formed the population of the study. The sample

consisted of 600 students randomly drawn from six senior secondary schools in Nsukka Urban.

The instrument for data collection was a teacher-made Composition Achievement Test (CAT), consisting of one item “Dee mbo di iche iche ndi ochichi ala anyi na-agba iji hu na iji egbe ezu ohi belatara n’ala anyi”. Meaning: ‘Write on different efforts made by our leaders to ensure that armed robbery is curbed in our society’. It was adapted from the WAEC past question paper on Igbo language paper I (2012). The students were required to write 300 words on the essay topic for a period of 45 minutes. The 300 words and time limit are in consonance with the WAEC Igbo language practice. The students’ scripts were marked and scored over 100 marks based on the WAEC criteria for scoring essays and letters in Igbo language. Thus: content= 40 marks, organization= 20 marks, expression= 28 marks and mechanical accuracy= 12marks. The data was generated from students’ marked scripts and were analyzed using percentage and frequency.

RESULTS

The results obtained were presented as shown in table one and two.

Research Question 1: What are the commonest errors committed by secondary school students in Igbo written composition?

Table 1: Commonest errors found in 600 Scripts of students’ Igbo written Composition

Content Error	No	%	Expression Error	No	%
1 Not having adequate facts	40	6.7	1 Non usage of sound Igbo figurative expression	83	13.9
2 Writing out of point	32	5.3	2 Wrong use of Igbo figurative expression	24	4
			3 Use of dialects	65	10.9
Total	72	12		172	28.8
Organization Error			Mechanical Error		
1 Wrong word order	21	3.5	A. Morphological error		
2 Wrong sentence arrangement	38	6.3	1 Wrong spelling	70	11.7
3 Wrong paragraphing	37	6.2	2 Incorrect formation of plural	26	4.3
			3 Wrong use of tense	55	9.2
			B. Punctuation error		
			1 Wrong capitalization	12	2
			2 Wrong use of punctuation marks	97	16.2
Total	96	16	Total	260	43.4
Grand Total	600				

Table 1 shows the percentage of students that committed different types of error in their Igbo written composition. In content error, 6.7% of the students committed error of not having adequate facts while 5.3% committed error of writing out of point. Under organization, 3.5% committed error of wrong word order, 6.3% committed error of wrong sentence arrangement whereas 6.2% committed error of wrong paragraphing. In expression error, non use of sound Igbo figurative expression has 13.9%, wrong use of Igbo figurative expression has 4% and use of dialects has 10.9%. Mechanical errors, which are subdivided into morphological and punctuation errors have the highest percentage. Under the morphological errors, Wrong spelling has 11.7%. Incorrect formation of plural has 4.3% while wrong use of tenses has 9.2%. In punctuation errors, wrong capitalization has 2% whereas wrong use of punctuation marks has 16.2%. Therefore, the commonest errors committed by students in Igbo written composition are errors of expression and mechanical errors.

Research Question 2: At what frequencies do students commit errors in Igbo language written composition?

Table 2: The Frequencies at Which Students Commit Errors in Igbo Written Composition

Content Error	No	%	Freq.	Expression Error	No	%	Freq.
1 Not having adequate facts	40	6.7	40	1 Non usage of sound Igbo figurative expression	83	13.9	83
2 Writing out of point	32	5.3	32	2 Wrong use of Igbo figurative expression	24	4	29
				3 use of dialects	65	10.9	89
Total	72	12	72	Total	172	28.8	201
Organization Error				Mechanical Error			
				A. Morphological error			
1 Wrong Word order	21	3.5	35	1 Wrong spelling	70	11.7	225
2 Wrong Sentence arrangement	38	6.3	42	2 Incorrect formation of plural	26	4.3	66
3 Wrong paragraphing	37	6.2	58	3 Wrong use of tense	55	9.2	64
				B. Punctuation error			
				1 Wrong capitalization	12	2	18
				2 Wrong use of punctuation marks	97	16.2	476
Total	96	16	135	Total	260	43.4	849
Grand Total	600						

Table 2 indicates frequencies at which each of the identified errors occurred in students' written composition. Under content error, not having adequate fact and writing out of point have 40 and 32 as their frequencies respectively. In organization error, wrong word order has 35; wrong sentence arrangement has 42 while wrong paragraphing has 58 as its frequency. The frequencies of errors under expression are as follows: non use of sound Igbo figurative expression 83, wrong use of Igbo figurative expression 29 and use of dialects 89. Mechanical error is sub divided into two- morphological and punctuation errors. Morphological error which is further divided into error of wrong spelling, incorrect formation of plural error and error of wrong use of tenses have frequencies of 225, 66 and 64 respectively. Under punctuation error, the frequency for wrong capitalization is 18 whereas that of wrong use of punctuation marks is 476.

DISCUSSIONS

The results in tables 1 and 2 show that although students committed different types of errors in their written composition, the commonest errors are the error of expression and error of mechanics which 28.8 % and 43.4% of the students committed at 201 and 849 frequencies respectively. In the expression error, non use of sound Igbo figurative language and use of dialects occurred at 83 and 89 frequencies respectively. This could be linked to the fact that Igbo people shy away from their cultural values which include the use of figurative language that the Igbo language is known for. A core Igbo man drives home his point using figurative expressions like proverbs, idioms and parables. That is why the Igbos would always say that proverb is the salt with which the Igbos eat words, (Nwadike, 2009). Again, the Igbo language

is full of dialects. Nwaozuzu (2008) opined that the dialects of the Igbo language are too diversified. Therefore, most of the students already speak their dialects before coming to school. As such, they learn the standard version of the language like people learning a second language. In such a situation, students are tempted to express themselves using their dialects, even when they are writing. This finding is similar to Yahya, Ishak, Zainal, Faghat, and Yahaya, (2012) who noted that mother tongue interference and language transfer are part of the causes of error in students' essay writing.

Furthermore, among the errors of mechanics, wrong use of punctuation marks is the one that students commit more. The percentage of students that committed it is 16.2 at 476 frequencies. This finding is in consonance with WAEC Chief Examiner's report (2012) where it was observed that one of the major problems students have in Igbo composition writing is wrong use of the punctuation marks and the diacritic marks. Igbo language is a language that makes use of both the conventional punctuation marks and diacritic marks. These diacritic marks not only help in adding semantic value to write ups, they also differentiate one sound segment from the other. Therefore, wrong application of these marks could dearth students' chances of obtaining good marks in their essay write ups.

CONCLUSIONS

Learning a language demands not only willingness, but also practice and commitment by both learners and teacher. That is why, indisputably, error analysis is a fundamental and relevant tool in language teaching, in order to reorganize and transform the teacher's point of view and readdress his/her methodology, with the aim of fixing and filling the students' gaps. When a teacher realizes the nature of his/her students' errors and their possible sources, he/she can make better decisions, which will positively affect students' performance and fulfill current pedagogical and professional demands. A better understanding of the learner can help the teacher understand what elements are playing a role in the students' learning process. Likewise, by analyzing and recognizing students' errors, one may come to value the fact that errors are the most significant evidence of students' efforts to follow the path of the learning process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers made the following recommendations:

- Students must identify their difficulties and needs by recognizing the importance of punctuation and diacritic marks in Igbo writings. They should internalize this knowledge and utilize it for production.
- Igbo language teachers must help students to raise their awareness of how to organize Igbo essay writing, they should provide students with ample amounts of language input and instruction, as well as encouraging the use of Igbo figurative expressions among students.
- Igbo language teachers should give consideration to the development and use of teaching materials and effective teaching strategies/ approaches to suit the different levels and needs of the learners most especially in writing.
- Igbo language teachers should always read external examinations' Chief Examiners' reports to enable them know areas students are constantly having problems in essay writing to enable the teachers address those problem areas in the course of their teachings.
- More studies on students' errors must be conducted to find out other errors students might be committing in their essay writing, which this study may not have covered.

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